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Yellow Rain's Year: 'Like Laughing at Guernica'

By Sterling Seagrave

In Bangkok, Thailand, this summer, one often heard a favorite joke among the foreign embassy crowd, and it was on the Americans.

It seemed that a U.S. diplomat collecting evidence in Thailand of "yellow rain" poison attacks had located a Hmong villager from Laos who was suffering nightmarish medical symptoms. The American had to transport the Hmong to a medical center in Bangkok quickly. He fought through the necessary red tape, eventually arranging air tickets for the Hmong, and a message to the big refugee camp at Ban Vinai asked that the man be put on the plane. Doctors and U.S. embassy staff in Bangkok waited eagerly. The plane was met, and the Hmong rushed to Siriraj Hospital for an awesome battery of tests—which established that he was in excellent health.

Night after night at diplomatic receptions, storytellers paused before delivering the punch line: "The Americans, you see, had got *the wrong Hmong.*"

This embarrassing foul-up probably could have been avoided if they had simply put the Hmong survivor on the embassy attache's plane for a quick flight to Bangkok. The plane at the time was on routine milk runs. But that wasn't done, U.S. embassy staffers explained, because the Pentagon has never told the attache's office that the yellow rain investigation is to be rated and handled as a "priority."

The U.S. investigation of yellow rain has been plagued from the beginning with just this sort of petty mixup. The result is that one year after Secretary of State Haig announced the first "preliminary" evidence that poisons were being used as weapons against people in Indochina and Afghanistan, the yellow-rain case remains "preliminary."

Certainly, more than enough scientific evidence has accumulated to convince even the most stubborn skeptics that some grotesque poison is being used over there. This spring, a previously skeptical Washington Post editorially praised what it called the first "hard evidence"—blood and urine samples from casualties of a poison attack in Cambodia. Science magazine drew the same conclusion this June.

Nonetheless, the investigation has been hampered by bickering between the State Department and its critics, and in recent weeks seems to have run out of steam.

Afraid of Repercussions?

This is all the more puzzling since a dozen other countries are now said to have arrived at their own independent verifications of the poison charges. Among them only Canada conducted its investigation in the open and publicly announced its confirmation in June.

U.S. officials say the other investigating countries include France, West Germany, Britain, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Israel, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, China and an unidentified Latin American nation. The officials say these countries have discussed their findings privately with Washington but have not gone public partly because their investigations were carried out clandestinely by intelligence services and they don't want to disclose the circumstances or methods. A more important reason, the officials add, is that governments such as France think that a "premature" announcement of findings might provoke severe political repercussions from the domestic left wing.

The reverse applies in Bonn. There the conservative Christian Democrats have been attempting to use the yellow-rain issue against Chancellor Helmut Schmidt's coalition. The CDU has charged in parliament that Mr. Schmidt has for many months had evidence of the use of biotoxins by the Soviets—a point conceded in parliament last December by a government spokesman—but that Mr. Schmidt has avoided discussing the issue in the interest of *Ostpolitik.*

This attitude apparently prevails in some international agencies as well. Scientists at the Ebenhausen think-tank outside Munich claim that Germans on the staff of the International Red Cross in Geneva speak privately of hard evidence which they say the Red Cross refuses to disclose "for political reasons."

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Red Cross doctors are known to have performed autopsies on purported gas victims in Cambodia, but have always denied finding evidence that communist forces were using poisons. But doctors of the International Rescue Committee, working in the same locations, provided the blood and urine specimens regarded as the most persuasive evidence to date.

While the West temporizes, the gas attacks reportedly continue undiminished. In Laos, according to the U.S. embassy in Bangkok, yellow-rain assaults have persisted through this spring and summer. The attacks are usually interrupted each year by the monsoon rains between June and September. This year the rains were late, and the attacks continued to be reported to the end of June.

U.S. scientists involved in the Afghanistan investigation say they believe the Afghan compounds will eventually prove similar to toxins used in Indochina, but more advanced. They say hundreds of tests are needed to identify various toxins, each requiring separate samples, and only a tedious process of elimination might find the right test for the right poison. This was the case for the initial yellow-rain compound, which was correctly identified in August 1981 only after hundreds of samples had been tested for five years for the wrong poisons.

The assumption that the poisons in Afghanistan may prove more sophisticated than the yellow rain of Laos and Cambodia apparently rests on the fact, according to U.S. officials, that they are being used by crack Soviet military units, armed with the latest equipment.

In Bangkok, Thai military sources say the only explanation for the continued use of the poisons is that both Hanoi and Moscow regard the present investigations with contempt.

"Obviously, they believe that politics will prevent the Western nations from uniting on this issue," a Thai general, who requested anonymity, said in an interview. "So far even the Americans can't agree, which we find very strange. First they argue over whether the reports are true. When they concede that the reports are probably trustworthy, they argue over the nature of the poisons. As soon as the approximate nature of the poisons is established, they argue over the proportions of one toxin to another, about every stray inconsistency, though it must be clear to everyone by now that more than one poison is being used. What is lost in all of this argument is that many people are being systematically murdered with biological poisons for the first time in modern history."

"What difference does it make," he asked, "whether six million Jews were murdered with Zyklon-B or with carbon monoxide? Now, as then, everybody knows that gassings are taking place, and everybody knows full well who is behind it, so the bickering makes a mockery of human tragedy. It is grotesque, like laughing at Guernica."

Despite U.S. pronouncements on the issue, only two American officials in Southeast Asia have been actively investigating it. The two men, Army Lt. Col. Charles D. Lane and Southeast Asian specialist Edward McWilliams, have had to conduct their investigation and collection of evidence on weekends, after hours, and often at their own expense. They were not relieved of their normal duties at the embassy when they were assigned to handle field work in the yellow-rain inquiry. Because the subject lacks official "priority," the two borrow cars, beg rides in the countryside and use jungle buses and oxcarts.

When a gas attack occurs, sometimes in sight of Thai border police, specially equipped Thai chemical troops hurry to the scene in full protective gear and collect samples of soil, water and leaves. Thai medical corpsmen perform quick field autopsies on the victims. When they return to the Thai border, to send their samples to Bangkok, Mr. McWilliams or Col. Lane will try to obtain a portion of what the Thais have collected. For more than a year they sent hundreds of samples to Washington before the discovery was made of the yellow-rain toxins.

Mr. McWilliams and Col. Lane currently work through refugees, persuading them to go back to the sites of gas attacks to scrape powder from rocks, or to collect charcoal from village firepits or hair from corpses, because these may best retain traces.

Each of the men has color photographs of Soviet aircraft taken while they were actually spraying yellow rain. The aircraft are clearly visible but only about the size of a fingernail. "Unfortunately," Col. Lane says, "you can't tell a thing from the pictures."

Both men have been decorated quietly by the U.S. for their achievements in obtaining the so-called "smoking gun" evidence. Mr. McWilliams has been promoted back to Washington to prepare for assignment to Moscow, leaving Col. Lane to continue the U.S. field work in Southeast Asia. He will continue to do so without a "priority" rating from the Pentagon, because, according to a member of the U.S. interagency group running the investigations, the decision to assign a priority to the inquiry was "decided but not carried out."

The lack of coordination stems in part from competition between the Pentagon and the State Department over which agency would direct the investigation—a dispute that was complicated by strong differences between the Secretaries of State and Defense.

The initiative was originally seized by Mr. Haig. Insiders at State say he was convinced that the poison gas issue would cause an international uproar. He believed it would arouse Europeans against Moscow and counterbalance the protest over the U.S.'s neutron weapons.

Jealousy Among Agencies

"Haig was right in principle," says a career diplomat in Washington. "What difference is there really between radioactive poison and biological poison? They both kill indiscriminately. But the real difference, as Haig saw, was that the Soviets were actually using the toxins, while we were not using the neutron bomb. Somehow that distinction got lost."

Warned off by Mr. Haig, the CIA and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency kept a low profile during the investigation. The Pentagon's role was generally limited to Col. Lane's efforts in the field, and to laboratory support at Fort Detrick, where Dr. Sharon Watson accomplished a number of breakthroughs in identifying the poisons and deducing Soviet logic in compounding them. The CIA's role initially was held to supervising the scientific and medical aspects of the investigation. Territorial jealousies kept the CIA from becoming directly involved in field work in Thailand, but this was not so in Afghanistan. There the State Department and Pentagon kept hands off while the CIA handled the investigation. This included running agents over the border from Pakistan, and tapping sources inside Kabul.

Hampered by those interagency rivalries, the yellow-rain investigation never seriously got off the ground, and the State Department was never able to arouse much domestic or international outrage. And with Mr. Haig waging conflict with Defense Secretary Weinberger throughout, there was little chance of formulating effective strategy or policy at the highest levels.

Mr. Haig also kept the White House at a distance from the yellow-rain issue for a long time, according to a State Department source, "because it was decided that Ronnie couldn't handle the (technical) questions" from the press.

"Just as the skeptics were finally coming around this summer," says another official, "Haig suddenly quit. It may take months for the new management to get the restaurant running properly again."

While the new team at State gets up to speed, the Pentagon and CIA seem to be asserting themselves and noises are being made about "a renewed effort." Whether this will lead at last to a coordinated U.S. investigation and to overcoming apathy in the West on the spraying of Asians with poison remains to be seen.

Mr. Seagrave is the author of "Yellow Rain: A Journey Through the Terror of Chemical Warfare" (M. Evans & Co.)